

Brady photos go on display as a single unit

By Lawrence L. Knutson

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WASHINGTON — Photographic pioneer Mathew Brady created some of the best-known images of 19th-century America, but most of his work has not been seen together since Brady closed his Washington studio more than 100 years ago.

The National Portrait Gallery is changing that with a collection of portraits depicting generals and actors, poets and villains. "Mathew Brady Portraits: Images as History, Photography as Art" opened this week.

Brady displayed almost all the photographs in his galleries to drum up business. Among them were pictures of newspaper editor Horace Greeley, poet Walt Whitman, showman P.T. Barnum, novelist Henry James as a small boy, Civil War nurse Clara Barton and actor Junius Brutus Booth, father of President Abraham Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth;

The collection also features famous images of Lincoln and of the principal antagonists of the Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee.

Curators readily admit that no one can certify whether any of the 100 images were shot by Brady himself.

Peering through glasses and wearing a trademark goatee, Brady was more a photographic showman and attractor of customers. Dozens of technicians prepared the daguerreotype plates and glass negatives, made the exposures and printed the photographs. But each of the carefully posed images bears the Brady Studio mark alone.

"We can't say that he focused the lens," said Mary Panzer, the Portrait Gallery's curator of photography. "If you are looking for the actual person who made the exposure, it's impossible to say."

"But he had greater credibility as an artist for not being the one to soil his hands with photographic chemicals or to focus the lens or to click the shutter," she said as she led a tour of the exhibit.

"He arranged the pose, worked with the subject and he probably said when to click the shutter. He was the conductor of the orchestra," she said.

So there's Grant, left hand on hip, right hand and forearm leaning on a tree outside a Union Army tent, looking as if he's about to sink into the camp chair nearby and whittle a stick.

And there's Lee, in Confederate gray, seated in an elaborately carved chair on the back porch of his Richmond, Va., home a few days after he surrendered to Grant at Appomattox.

"It was supposed that after his defeat it would be



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preposterous to ask him to sit, but I thought that to be the time for the historical picture," Brady recalled decades later.

The Brady studio photographed Lincoln in New York in 1859 to deliver his soon-to-be-famous Cooper Union address. In the final print the Brady operatives raised the presidential candidate's collar to hide his scrawny neck, tamed his unruly hair and smoothed his awkward features. An engraving of the photograph appeared full page on the front of Harper's Weekly.

"Brady and the Cooper Union made me president," Lincoln said after his inauguration in 1861.

Some portraits in the exhibit were made in 1849, just a decade after the invention of photography.

"For viewers born years before that invention, you can imagine the shock and astonishment that must have been in everyone's mind as they saw these images of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun," Panzer said.

"They felt as though they were looking at the steely presence of John C. Calhoun himself, not just a picture of him."

Panzer believes Brady made pictures with an eye to the future, not just to amaze and entertain his contemporaries.

"He was thinking about posterity," she said. "We are the people for whom these photographs were made."

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